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Viewing cable 06ATHENS3254, ATHENS RSI DECEMBER 2006 READOUT

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06ATHENS3254	2006-12-28 13:44	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET//NOFORN	Embassy Athens

Appears in these articles:

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VZCZCXRO5563
OO RUEHAG RUEHKW RUEHROV
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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7735
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ATHENS 003254

SIPDIS

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/28/2016

REF: A. ISTANBUL 1201

[1](#)B. SECSTATE 90114

Classified By: CHARGES D'AFFAIRES THOMAS COUNTRYMAN. REASONS 1.4 (B) A
ND (D).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: On December 11, Embassy Athens hosted Chiefs of Mission and others from posts in Amman, Ankara, Beirut, Cairo, Nicosia, Rome (MFO), Sofia, and Tel Aviv, as well as participants from S/CT, INL, NEA, DOJ, OSD, CENTCOM, EUCOM, and the NCTC, for an Eastern Mediterranean conference of the Regional Counter-Terrorism Strategy Initiative (RSI). Participants described terrorist threats within their host countries, linkages to trans-national terrorism (principally al-Qaida, but also the PKK and Hizballah), and possible regional policy responses. Given the complex nature of the threats, participants foresaw effective responses in policies combining diplomatic efforts and assistance to host governments, intelligence collection and information sharing, economic measures, military power, as well as public diplomacy, particularly through the internet, which was seen as the medium of choice for terrorists. The work of the conference focused on five key areas of concern:

- the persistent terrorist threat in Sinai;
- the threat to European border security posed by returning jihadists;
- the PKK,s role in destabilizing Turkey, Iraq, and Western Europe;
- Lebanon as the front line in the struggle between democracy and Iranian theological revolution;
- challenges and best practices for our public diplomacy in countering terrorist propaganda.

The incoming Eastern Med regional CT coordinator was able to participate in the conference, which will help this officer get off to a strong start when she arrives in Istanbul in mid-2007. Regional participants welcomed the opportunity to work cooperatively and looked forward to meeting again)- a point they underscored with Washington participants. END SUMMARY.

AN EVOLVING THREAT) AND DYNAMIC RESPONSE

[1](#)2. (S/NF) The December 11 Athens conference was the second Eastern Mediterranean RSI meeting; the first was held in Istanbul in June 2006 (ref a). COMs and other participants viewed the RSI format as a valuable one, in this case especially because it brought together participants from two different regional bureaus and the MFO. Flows of terrorist personnel, goods, finances, and ideas are dynamic, involving potential threats to the United States and Europe, which, participants underscored, demand agile, field-driven policy responses. Participants focused on a number of issues first raised at the June RSI conference, as well as newly emerging potential threats, such as those in the Sinai.

THE SINAI TIME BOMB

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Participants viewed the Sinai as the site of persistent terrorist activity. Al-Tawhid wa Al-Jihad, an indigenous Islamist bedouin terror group, has carried out three major terrorist bombings in Sinai resort communities since 2004. In addition, it has -- so far unsuccessfully -- targeted the Multi-national Force and Observers (MFO) with one IED and two suicide bombings. Ambassador Larocco, MFO Director General, described the Sinai as a &time bomb8 with consequences for Israel, Gaza, and Jordan, as well as Egypt.

Weapons trafficking, a profitable element in the broader smuggling apparatus between Sinai and Gaza, attracts a high volume of weapons and explosives to the area. According to Larocco, because this includes Strela missiles, MFO helicopters no longer fly in the vicinity of the Gaza border.

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The introduction of the Egyptian border force in September 2005 -- concurrent with the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza -- has failed to curb the weapons smuggling. The Egyptians insist that more troops are needed but have not received permission under the Camp David Accords for additional troops. Although there is no treaty limit on the number of police forces in the area, all agree that police on the ground have not been effective.

14. (S/NF) The USG has engaged with the Egyptians on technical assistance at the border to address smuggling, but there appears to be no simple technological fix, especially in light of treaty limitations. Egyptian, Israeli, and Palestinian border authorities have met on a regular basis, but meetings were disrupted by violence in Gaza last summer. The parties are now working to re-start these consultations. The Egyptians are also hampered by their own bureaucratic infighting over Sinai, which has impeded economic and political development in the region.

Participants identified five discreet avenues of activity as potentially fruitful:

- increasing Egyptian intelligence collection and capacity;
- improving border controls;
- strengthening legal/legislative measures;
- addressing deeper economic and social conditions;
- continued diplomacy, focusing on cross-border consultations.

Participants also agreed that the USG should share best practices developed elsewhere with Egypt and Israel)- perhaps by funding a conference to share information on technical means to disrupt terrorist activity, such as terrorist financing.

RETURNING JIHADISTS: THE NEXT BIG THING

15. (S/NF) Participants agreed that as the situation in Iraq and/or Afghanistan changed, many jihadists were likely to leave those theaters and attempt to transit to Western Europe, creating a new CT problem. Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus were identified as likely transit nations in the eastern Mediterranean, while European and American border-control tools to deal with the problem were described as uneven and disjointed, allowing little bilateral or international cooperation. Examples of the latter were the absence of a common European database of useful information beyond the embryonic Schengen & Information System.⁸ Moreover, American databases held by the CIA, FBI, DHS, State, etc. were stovepiped. The obstacles to overcoming these problems were both procedural and technical.

16. (S/NF) Using a discussion paper developed by Ambassador Ries and country team on ways to counter the threat posed by returning jihadists, participants identified two specific areas to begin work. First, the U.S. needed to make decisions on what watchlist information)- especially biometric -- it could share with European border-control agencies and how to do so. Second, a first step to cooperation with the Europeans would be a conference involving experts below the political level but senior enough to make decisions/commitments. After considerable discussion of possible venues, it was decided that S/CT would coordinate with EUR/ACE and DOJ to organize a conference involving participants, host countries and perhaps others and Interpol. The question of whether the conference would be

small and regionally focused or larger and more theoretically oriented was left open, though the majority of participants leaned toward a smaller conference focused on technical standards of data sharing, with a larger conference as a next step. The Southeast European Cooperative Initiative Center in Bucharest was discussed as a model for developing this type of cooperation.

PKK: NUMBER TWO AFTER AL-QAIDA

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17. (S/NF) 2006 saw a major increase in terrorist violence by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The Germans have described the PKK as the second most significant contemporary terrorist threat after al-Qaida and the number-one organized-crime threat in Europe (though the French and Swiss have downplayed or avoided the issue). The PKK also represents a major political threat insofar as perceived U.S./Iraqi inaction against the PKK safehaven in Northern Iraq could provoke Turkish intervention. The U.S. has been working on several fronts against the PKK, but much remains to be done. Moreover, action against the PKK by the Europeans would create a good optic with the Turks as Turkey's EU accession slows. The Principals Committee recently raised the PKK from a Tier 3 to a Tier 2 terrorist threat, which will allow for the commitment of greater collection resources to track PKK activity. There is active interagency collaboration in Washington to shut down PKK camps and review options against PKK leaders in Iraq. Participants suggested a number of possible steps for the U.S. and Europeans: follow-on consultations in Europe by S/CT Deputy Urbancic, which might include southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean; increased counter-terrorist training programs with the Turks; increased intelligence sharing, including by other RSI countries; increased overflights of PKK bases in Iraq (this reportedly has a strong psychological impact on the PKK) - the Turks also have expressed interest in commercial purchase of surveillance blimps); strengthening of obstacles to PKK financial flows; political pressure on Kurdish leader Barzani to shut PKK bases/centers; a DOJ push on the European prosecutors, liaison group EuroJust to focus on PKK; and a diplomatic push on the Germans during their EU presidency to promote anti-PKK efforts.

LEBANON: FRONT LINE OF U.S./IRAN CONFLICT

18. (S/NF) Lebanon was described as a new surrogate conflict: while the U.S. sought to promote democracy and stability, Iran sought to export theological revolution through Hizballah. Hizballah received tremendous financial, material, and spiritual backing from Iran and, while the terrorist group suffered significant infrastructure damage from the attack by Israel last summer, it emerged organizationally unscathed, if not stronger, and was likely to rebuild itself in 6-8 months. Syria was also seeking avenues to increase its influence in Lebanon. The U.S. had begun to describe Hizballah as a global terrorist threat. Participants focused on several areas of activity, emphasizing the need to continue our efforts in all: working towards establishing a common political vision for the country; pre-emptive PD action to head off Hizballah propaganda undermining the democratic process; build-up of the Lebanese government's ability to police through equipment and training grants (in 19 recent bombing cases, no one has been arrested, undermining police legitimacy); increase of costs to Iran and Syria for intervention and support of Hizballah; and more work with Europeans to increase awareness of the Hizballah threat.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY COUNTERING TERRORIST PROPAGANDA

¶9. (S/NF) While all conference participants agreed on the importance of a strong PD push against the terrorist message, there was general frustration at the success of our efforts so far, including the inability of the Department to secure desired funding for relevant PD efforts. Participants thus focused primarily on developing new, indirect methods to get our message across. For example, an increase in the number of foreign students in American schools and of American students in foreign schools was seen as paying large long-term dividends. Embassy Athens shared the experience of its program on countering anti-Americanism in working with private foundations to support lecture visits by major American figures outside the world of foreign policy. Athens, experience with its brand new youth website &www.Mosaiko.gr8 was also cited as a model for other

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embassies. EUCOM discussed its experience with its &www.setimes.com8 website and the Marshall Center,s extensive expertise, including a program on Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism. These and a number of other EUCOM tools are at the USG,s disposal in the public diplomacy realm. Participants agreed that television and radio appearances)- particularly when done in host-country languages)- were much more effective than conferences of diplomats, politicians, and scholars. Finally, participants agreed that progress on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, in addition to bringing greater stability to the region, would also have immense PD impact.

LOOKING AHEAD

¶10. (S/NF) Regional ambassadors will decide on the timing and venue for the next meeting and asked S/CT, DOD, and other Washington participants to underscore the important synergy such meetings bring to regional cooperation efforts. Ambassador Crumpton previewed the four new full-time regional RSI coordinator positions that have been created (with six others in the works) and noted that the Eastern Mediterranean center would be located in Congen Istanbul. He also emphasized Washington,s support for flexible, dynamic regional networks and initiatives to counter terrorists. The conference agreed that RSI has proved effective not only in promoting counter-terrorism initiatives but also for promoting inter-embassy, inter-agency, and inter-regional cooperation.

¶11. (C) Conference participants cleared this message.
COUNTRYMAN